

Message Text

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ACTION EB-08

INFO OCT-01 EUR-12 ISO-00 CAB-02 CIAE-00 COME-00

DODE-00 DOTE-00 INR-07 NSAE-00 FAA-00 SCS-03

SCA-01 PA-01 USIA-06 PRS-01 SP-02 SS-15 /059 W

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R 011507Z APR 77

FM AMEMBASSY MADRID

TO SECSTATE WASHDC 9689

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E.O. 11652: N/A

TAGS: EAIR, CASC, SP

SUBJECT: ORGANIZATIONAL ARRANGEMENTS TO DEAL WITH THE TENERIFE
AVIATION DISASTER

1. IT MAY BE USEFUL TO THE DEPARTMENT TO REVIEW OUR EXPERIENCE
WITH THE ORGANIZATIONAL ARRANGEMENTS MADE HERE TO DEAL WITH
AVIATION TRAGEDY IN TENERIFE.

2. FIRST NOTIFICATION OF THE ACCIDENT WAS RECEIVED IN THE
MISSION AT ABOUT 8:00 P.M. ON SUNDAY EVENING, MARCH 27.
AN AD HOC WORKING GROUP HEADED BY THE CHARGE AND INCLUDING
THE ACTING CONSUL GENERAL, THE CIVIL AVIATION OFFICER, THE
DUTY OFFICER, A CODE CLERK, AND A SECRETARY, WAS IMMEDIATELY
FORMED. OTHER CONCERNED ELEMENTS OF THE MISSION WERE
INFORMED, OR THEY THEMSELVES SPONTANEOUSLY CALLED IN TO
OFFER THEIR SERVICES. ESSENTIAL PERSONNEL WERE PLACED
ON TWENTY-FOUR HOUR DUTY.

3. BY 1:00 A.M. MARCH 28, FIVE HOURS LATER, A SEVEN-PERSON
WORKING TEAM WAS ON ITS WAY TO TENERIFE OF THE MAAG PLANE.
THIS TEAM WAS HEADED BY THE EMBASSY ADMINISTRATIVE COUNSELOR
AND INCLUDED THE AIR ATTACHE, TWO CONSULAR OFFICERS, A
MILITARY DOCTOR, THE PRESS ATTACHE, AND A SECRETARY.

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IT ARRIVED IN TENERIFE ABOUT 1:00 P.M. ON THE 28TH, AFTER
A FOUR AND ONE-HALF HOUR FLIGHT TO LAS PALMAS AND A FIVE
HOUR FERRY RIDE FROM LAS PALMAS TO TENERIFE. TENTATIVE
ARRANGEMENTS HAD BEEN MADE FOR A HELICOPTER LIFT FROM
LAS PALMAS TO TENERIFE, BUT THE HELICOPTER WAS NOT AVAILABLE.
THE TEAM FOUND THE SITUATION ON TENERIFE STILL CHAOTIC
AND CONFUSED.

4. EARLY IN THE MORNING OF THE 28TH, TWO MORE WORKING GROUPS WERE FORMED, ONE IN MADRID AND ONE IN LAS PALMAS: THE ONE IN MADRID WAS HEADED BY THE ACTING CONSUL GENERAL AND INCLUDED THE NAVAL ATTACHE (WHO WAS ALSO ACTING DEFENSE ATTACHE), THE CIVIL AVIATION OFFICER, A VICE CONSUL BROUGHT IN FROM SEVILLE, THE DUTY OFFICER, AND SUPPORT PERSONNEL. THE PUBLIC AFFAIRS OFFICER AND ANOTHER USIS OFFICER RESPONDED TO PRESS QUERIES. ALL MEMBERS OF THE MISSION WERE ASKED TO BE READY TO HELP IF NEEDED. MANY VOLUNTEERED THEIR SERVICES. THE WORKING GROUP IN LAS PALMAS, AN IMPORTANT STAGING POINT, WAS HEADED BY THE CONSUL IN SEVILLE AND INCLUDED THE CONSULAR AGENT IN LAS PALMAS, HIS SECRETARY, AND THE SEVILLE CONSULATE'S LOCAL EMPLOYEE EXPERT IN PROTECTION AND WELFARE CASES. THE THREE WORKING GROUPS, IN MADRID, TENERIFE AND LAS PALMAS, WERE UNDER THE OVERALL DIRECTION OF THE CHARGE.

5. IN TENERIFE FIRST PRIORITY WAS GIVEN TO THE IDENTIFICATION AND ASSESSMENT OF THE CONDITION OF THE SURVIVORS. WHEN THIS HAD BEEN DONE IT WAS DETERMINED THAT THE SERIOUSNESS OF THE CONDITION OF A NUMBER OF THEM WARRANTED THEIR EVACUATION TO THE UNITED STATES TO A HOSPITAL CAPABLE OF TREATING SEVERE BURN CASES. ARRANGEMENTS WERE MADE FOR AN AIR FORCE C-141 TO DO THE EVACUATION FROM LAS PALMAS, WITH A C-130 SHUTTLE THE INJURED FROM THE STILL-SEVERELY DAMAGED AIRPORT IN TENERIFE TO LAS PALMAS. A LITTLE LESS THAN FORTY-EIGHT HOURS AFTER LIMITED OFFICIAL USE

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THE ACCIDENT ALL INJURED SURVIVORS WERE ON THEIR WAY TO APPROPRIATE HOSPITAL CARE IN THE UNITED STATES.

6. MEANWHILE, TEAMS HAD ARRIVED FROM THE UNITED STATES TO INVESTIGATE THE ACCIDENT AND IDENTIFY THE DEAD TO THE EXTENT POSSIBLE, AND EMBALMING OF THE DEAD HAD BEGUN.

7. ARRANGEMENTS WERE MADE TO EVACUATE THE DEAD TO THE UNITED STATES IN PLANES CHARTERED BY PAN AMERICAN AS SOON AS THE TENERIFE AIRPORT WAS OPEN FOR FULL SERVICE. THE AIRPORT WAS OPENED ON SATURDAY AFTERNOON-, APRIL 2, AND THE EVACUATION OCCURED ON SUNDAY, APRIL 3.

8. THE NATIONAL TRANSPORTATION SAFETY BOARD TEAM CAME TO MADRID ON APRIL 2, AND WILL COMPLETE ITS CONTRIBUTION TO THE FINAL REPORT ON THE ACCIDENT HERE, WORKING OUT OF THE EMBASSY.

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9. THROUGHOUT THIS PERIOD ROUND-THE-CLOCK COMMUNICATIONS WITH AND SUPPORT FROM WASHINGTON WERE EXCELLENT. ALTHOUGH THE SITUATION IN TENERIFE WAS EXTRADORDINARILY COMPLEX AND CONFUSED IN THE FIRST HOURS AND DAYS, THE COOPERATION OF SPANISH AUTHORITIES AND THE PEOPLE OF TENERIFE WAS EXCEPTIONAL. ONE EXAMPLE: PATIENTS IN THE HOSPITALS OF TENERIFE OFFERED TO GIVE UP THEIR BEDS TO THOSE INJURED IN THE ACCIDENT.

10. WE BELIEVE THAT THE MISSION'S EFFORT TO MEET THIS EMERGENCY WAS APPROPRIATELY ORGANIZED AND EFFECTIVE. I PERSONALLY AM HEARTWARMED BY THE SPIRIT AND DEDICATION WITH WHICH SO MANY MEMBERS OF THE MISSION RESPONDED TO THE EMERGENCY. SOME OF THEM WORKED UNDER PRESSURE WITH LITTLE OR NO REST FOR A FORTY-EIGHT HOUR STRETCH UNTIL THE SURVIVORS WERE ON THEIR WAY BACK TO THE UNITED STATES. NEVERTHELESS, THERE ARE ALWAYS THINGS THAT COULD HAVE BEEN DONE BETTER. IN RETROSPECT, WE CAN THINK OF TWO PARTICULAR POINTS FOR IMPROVEMENT IN THIS CASE. THEY FOLLOW.

11. THE COMPOSITION OF THE TEAM THAT WENT TO TENERIFE WAS CRITICAL. THERE IS NO DOUBT THAT ITS BASIC COMPONENTS WERE CORRECT: A SENIOR, EXPERIENCED LEADER; A SENIOR SPANISH-SPEAKING OFFICER EXPERIENCED IN AVIATION MATTERS;
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TWO CONSULAR OFFICERS; A DOCTOR, WHOSE WORK ON THE CONDITION

OF THE PATIENTS WAS CRITICAL TO THE DECISION ON HOW, WHEN AND TO WHERE THEY SHOULD BE EVACUATED; AN EXPERIENCED PRESS OFFICER, TO DEAL WITH MULTIPLE AND INSISTENT DEMANDS OF A HORDE OF MEDIA REPRESENTATIVES TO WHICH NO ONE ELSE ATTENDED IN AN ORGANIZED FASHION; AND A SECRETARY TO ATTEND THE OFFICE. BUT TWO MORE MEMBERS OF THE TEAM, AT LEAST, WOULD HAVE BEEN DESIRABLE, TO SUPPLEMENT AND SPELL THE PRINCIPAL MEMBERS, AN AIDE TO THE TEAM LEADER AND A MILITARY ASSISTANT TO THE AIR ATTACHE. THE MAAG PLANE COULD NOT CARRY MORE IN THE INITIAL FLIGHT, BUT THESE TWO EXTRA PEOPLE COULD HAVE BEEN SENT ON BY COMMERCIAL FLIGHT THE NEXT DAY. IN THE EVENT, A SENIOR CONSULAR OFFICER WAS SENT IN MID-WEEK.

12. SECONDLY, REPORTING DOUBTLESS LEFT SOMETHING TO BE DESIRED IN THE EARLY, MOST CONFUSED PERIOD, WHEN THERE WERE MANY UNCERTAINTIES, THE PRESSURES WERE HEAVIEST, AND MOST COMMUNICATION WAS BY TELEPHONE. TO REMEDY THIS PROBLEM, TWO MORE OFFICERS MIGHT HAVE BEEN ASSIGNED TO THE MADRID WORKING GROUP WITH THE SPECIFIC TASK OF SPLITTING THE REPORTING RESPONSIBILITIES OF EACH TWENTY-FOUR HOUR PERIOD.

13. THIRDLY, COMMUNICATIONS AMONG TEAM MEMBERS IN TENERIFE WERE DIFFICULT BECAUSE OF OVERBURDENED TELEPHONE LINES. IT WOULD HAVE BEEN DESIREABLE FOR EACH TEAM MEMBER TO HAVE HAD A PORTABLE WALKIE-TALKIE. EATON

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